

# Why religious language is useful

[Philosophy](#)



## **‘ Religious language is meaningless’ Discuss**

The term “ religious language” refers to statements or claims made about God or gods. It is the communication of these statements that unite religions worldwide and pass on these religious ideas through generations. It can be difficult for some to find meaning from religious language due to the transcendent nature of God as well as the lack of observable, scientific evidence. However, many philosophers have found that religious language is in fact meaningful and serves a purpose.

The logical positivists were a group of philosophers who claimed that language only held meaning if it could be empirically tested using the five senses. Therefore, due to the ineffable nature of God, religious language has no meaning according to logical positivism. This is because religious statements all refer to a transcendent, immaterial being or concept which cannot be tested empirically as empiricism is contradicting to God’s omni-qualities. Logical positivism favours cognitive language which is factual language that can be known and verified using the verification principle. The verification principle was developed by A J Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and puts forward the criteria for determining whether language is meaningful or not, based on whether it can be empirically verified. If a synthetic statement is to be meaningful, it has to be capable of being tested empirically. Ayer stated: “ no sentence which describes the nature of a transcendent God can possess any literal significance”, this means that religious language holds no meaning because a transcendent God cannot be empirically verified using the verification principle. However, the verification principle restricts our language greatly, and not only religious statements

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become meaningless, but ethical ones do to. This is problematic as many ethical statements are important and without these or religious statements, there would be no guide on how to act morally. For example, the statement ‘murder is wrong’ would have no meaning. This in turn would lead to a very chaotic world; especially as our empirical senses are completely subjective so it would be difficult to find universal meanings. Furthermore, the verification principle is hoist to its own petard – meaning that by the very definition of what statements hold meaning, the verification principle can be disproven as the statement cannot be empirically verified and thus is meaningless. This ultimately makes the verification principle invalid and therefore it cannot be used to prove that religious language is meaningless.

For Logical positivists, meaning is factual and informative, however for religious believers meaning is personal – therefore empirical evidence cannot ever be used to disprove the meaning of religious language. Vincent Brummer was a philosopher who greatly disagreed with Ayer. He believed that to treat sentences of faith as if they were scientific sentences is to commit an error of understanding. He stated: “ Today many of us intuitively assume that all thinking is aimed at extending our knowledge”, meaning that many people falsely narrow meaning and the purpose of language down to that which can provide us with new knowledge. Whereas, especially with the case of religious language, not all information that is communicated must be factual or novel. Religious language instead can be an expression of personal love for God, and therefore should not be dismissed just because it cannot be treated in the same way that scientific statements can. Brummer has a compelling point because many concepts in our world surpass the scientific

aspect of life and we cannot discard them as they can be argued to be equally important. For example, scientific analysis should not be used to judge poetry. Overall, logical positivism and the verification principle fail to prove that religious language is meaningless as they allow for many nonsensical statements to hold meaning yet disprove important ethical ones, they are invalid. Furthermore, Brummer presents a convincing point that argues that religious language should be treated differently to scientific information.

A philosopher who presented a theory which would deem religious language to be meaningful is Ludwig Wittgenstein. He explored the idea that language was completely context dependent, and successfully took into account that words can have different meanings. He presented the language game theory – he decided to think of language as a game as we know how to play it once we know the rules. For Wittgenstein, language has specific meaning in each specific Lebensform. A Lebensform is a form of life, which has its own rules for language usage. For example, the word ‘ ruler’ is a piece of stationary used for measurements in the lebensform of school, whereas the word means a leader or somebody in power in the lebensform of politics.

Therefore, Wittgenstein would say that religion is a form of life, and therefore religious language has meaning in the lebensform of religion. The philosopher D. Z. Philips built on Wittgenstein’s theory and argued that religious language is just a way of defining the rules of the game of religion. Philips argued that the statement ‘ God is love’ is a way of showing how the word ‘ God’ should be used, instead of describing an actual being. Therefore, religious language is meaningful for those who genuinely use it, and many

religious concepts only have relevance in the specific context of religion. For those who do not have faith or participate in a religious way of life, religious language will have no meaning and it does not have to be justified to them. Wittgenstein quotes: “ The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”. This would mean that religious language only has meaning to those who participate in the religious lebensform. It also means that those who do not take part in the lebensform of religion should not attempt to find meaning in religious language as they do not understand the rules of this lebensform.

To conclude, the meaning of religious language should be treated as a subjective matter. For those who participate in the religious community or who are part of the lebensform of religion, religious language has meaning. It is a fault to attempt to treat religious statements in the same way as religious statements like the Logical Positivists do due to the difference in the nature of each statement. Science refers to the empirical, tangible realm whereas religious language refers to transcendent, equivocal concepts which are beyond empirical verification.